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GROUNDWATER PROTECTION

Pentagon Backs Off Water-Test Plan

Fuel-Ingredient Perchlorate Is Center Of Fight With EPA on Studies Near Bases

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By Peter Waldman, staff writer

The Pentagon is backing off a proposal to test for perchlorate at all defense sites in the U.S. in response to complaints from uniformed officials that it was too costly and unnecessary.

The Environmental Protection Agency for more than two years has been urging the Pentagon to test the groundwater beneath all its bases for perchlorate, a component of solid rocket fuel that pollutes water supplies in 20 states and that the EPA says may damage infant development. But the Defense Department resisted widespread testing, arguing that it should instead focus on sites where the substance is known to have been handled and where it poses a demonstrable threat to public drinking water.

The EPA seemed to gain the upper hand earlier this month when the office of John Paul Woodley Jr., assistant deputy undersecretary of defense for the environment, circulated draft guidelines that would have mandated perchlorate testing of all active, inactive and closed defense sites. It also would have compelled the military services to "plan and program for future cleanup" in places where the groundwater is found to contain perchlorate in levels above one part per billion. That threshold marked an additional concession to the EPA because its toxicologists believe that anything above that level is unsafe, while military scientists say that as much as 200 parts per billion is safe.

But some of the uniformed services complained that such comprehensive testing was unmerited and would consume tens of millions of dollars from scarce environmental-cleanup budgets, Defense Department officials said. So the proposal was scrapped, with Mr. Woodley now saying the draft guidelines "don't necessarily reflect my thinking." He added, "We're engaged with the services on deciding what steps we should take during this period of regulatory uncertainty."

This winter, after stiff opposition from the Pentagon and the White House, the EPA asked the National Academies of Science to review its draft report on how much perchlorate should be deemed dangerous to public health. The delay likely will add at least a year to the EPA's long process for setting a drinking-water standard.

Mr. Woodley said that in the meantime, any Pentagon testing guidelines would reflect "a great deal of deference" to scientific uncertainties about perchlorate's health effects. "Testing is something we should do, and probably will do eventually, but it's a question of priorities," he said, while acknowledging that "every military base has, at one time or another, had munitions that included a perchlorate component."

The aborted testing proposal has caused confusion at some bases. At Mare Island Naval Shipyard near San Francisco, Navy cleanup coordinator Jerry Dunaway announced the guidelines at a recent community meeting and agreed for the first time to a longstanding EPA request to test the base perchlorate. Later, he found out the draft guidelines were moot and rescinded his announcement.

"It's troublesome to have directives around that create an incomplete characterization of a site," said Emily Roth, EPA's project manager for Mare Island. "We'll never sign off on this site without perchlorate sampling."

The draft guidelines from Mr. Woodley's office were issued at a time when some senators concerned about the perchlorate issue, including California Democrat Barbara Boxer, were holding up his nomination to the new post of assistant secretary of the Army in charge of the Army Corps of Engineers' civil works. The Senate has yet to act on his nomination.

"Our policy is under constant review," Mr. Woodley said. "This was a draft for the purpose of attracting views."#

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Snapshot perchlorate ag study

Gilroy Dispatch - 6/19/03

By Jonathan Jeisel, staff writer

SAN MARTIN - Bob Cerruti is doing his own experiment with perchlorate and vegetables.

The well that supplies the water to Cerruti's residence of 16 years on San Martin's Moreno Court has tested positive for perchlorate, the chemical that has spread from a former Morgan Hill flare factory into South County's groundwater